

San Mateo County Times

September 2, 2003

Simitian champions outdoor education

FROM WIRE REPORTS

The opportunity for children from low-income families to learn geometry while out sailing on the open sea is one of several education opportunities that may get a boost through a bill by Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto.

AB 1330 would establish the California Outdoor Environmental Education Program, which provides a mechanism for private funding of such programs and an evaluation of program effectiveness.

Simitian, a former educator, says the legislation is "poised for passage" and creates a unique opportunity for underserved school children by encouraging them to learn through experiencing the outdoors.

"The goal is simple. Give students an opportunity to learn the importance of ecology in protecting our natural resources," the assemblyman said.

"Let them sail a ship or go backpacking in the hills. Let them understand the science of ecology and the world around them," Simitian said.

Simitian's proposal to establish the California Outdoor Environmental Education Program marks the first time in California that outdoor-education programs would be systematically developed, privately funded and then studied for their impact on student behavior and learning.

"The beauty of this bill is that it comes at absolutely no expense to the state," Simitian boasted, explaining that the roughly \$250,000 in seed funding will come from private sources.

The goals of outdoor education are not only simple, said Connie Martinez, executive director of the San Jose Children's Discovery Museum, "the kids love it.

"We've been offering programs like this for several years. We've seen how the kids react. It works.

"When you encourage children in real science that has relevance within their community and a context they can understand, it touches them and creates long-lasting results," Martinez added.

Gary Whitehouse, the youth development director of New Perspectives, who organizes student outings for the East Palo Alto nonprofit organization, also knows first-hand that these programs work and hopes to participate in the new Outdoor Education Program.

"We just got back from backpacking in Mount Shasta. We saw snow. A lot of these kids have never seen snow before," he said, noting that programs like these can change kids' lives.

"It gives them time to reflect and see new possibilities about what they want to do when they grow up."

Simitian's Outdoor Education Program would consist of four initial programs, all of which would help enable students to develop an appreciation for the diversity of California's natural environment through hands-on outdoor experiences. The legislation calls for the examination of the programs to see which ones work and which do not.

"Although there have been similar programs before, there have never been any meaningful evaluations," Simitian said.

"Now, for the first time, we have techniques in place that will test the successes of this program, enabling them to be documented or replicated."

If passed, the Sierra Club-sponsored bill would be administered by the State Department of Education.

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Santa Cruz Sentinel

September 5, 2003

Sea education program eyes new state funds

By DAVID SCHARFENBERG
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

A boatload of local students may be taking to the high seas next year under legislation making its way through Sacramento.

Assembly Bill 1330, written by State Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, and expected to be signed by Gov. Gray Davis in the coming weeks, would funnel about

\$250,000 into four outdoor education programs for underserved youth around the state.

A chief contender for the funding is Santa Cruz-based O'Neill Sea Odyssey, a nonprofit which takes 4,000 to 5,000 students aboard a 65-foot catamaran in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary every year to learn about marine science, navigation and ecology.

"I just think it's wonderful that

there will be a statewide fund to support getting these kids out in the open," said Dan Haifley, executive director of Sea Odyssey.

Haifley, who for the bill during a Senate hearing in July, said his organization likely would use the money to boost enrollment in its summer program, which serves 300 to 400 kids.

Simitian said Sea Odyssey would be "a very competitive can-

didate" for the funding, but added that the decision would rest with the California Department of Education, which is slated to run the program.

Simitian said the Sierra Club proposed the statewide outdoor education program in a meeting earlier this year and pledged to deliver about \$250,000 in seed money from the Sierra Club Foundation.

Part of the grant will pay for an independent evaluation of the program, to be completed by February 2005.

The program will use no public funds in the short term. But Martin LeBlanc, youth services representative for the Sierra Club, said he hopes to use the independent evaluation to build support for long-term public and private financing for the program once the

state's fiscal crisis passes.

Simitian said the hands-on nature of the program is at the root of its appeal.

"If you ask yourself, how do you interest more kids in science, the answer is, you make it real and relevant for them," he said.

Contact David Scharfenberg at dscharfenberg@santacruzsentinel.com.